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Don't Lie—Keep Silent

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a former Harvard University professor, a Pulitzer prize winner in history, and a confidant of the nation's highest officials, has admitted that he lied to a newspaperman in 1961 about the nature and size of the Cuban refugee landing in the Bay of Pigs.

This was a case in which the newspapers were used for a nonjournalistic purpose—it was, if you will, "news management"—and it takes a bit of explaining.

In his new book, "A Thousand Days," Schlesinger writes that the Central Intelligence Agency, as early as December, 1960, abandoned its plans for a guerrilla operation against Fidel Castro in favor of an invasion that numbered 1,400 men.

At the time of the landings, however—as he now acknowledges—Schlesinger told a New York Times reporter in Washington that the landing force totaled no more than 200 to 300 men, and that the operation was not an "invasion" but an attempt to supply the Cuban underground. "This," he now says, "was the cover story. I apologize for having been involved in passing along the cover story."

Schlesinger himself, in December, 1962, said in a speech that as a result of his participation in decisions in the White House, he could never "take the testimony of journalism in such matters seriously again."

"Their relation to reality," he said, "is often less than the shadows in Plato's cave."

If they are so, then the fault lies in part at least with Schlesinger and others who have deliberately misinformed the press. Newspapers are not perfect instruments of truth—they are fallible because like every other enterprise, they are run by fallible men. But more often than not they cannot be better than their sources of information. If men high in government service lie to

them, then the public is grievously misinformed, through no fault of the newspapers.

Obviously this game did not begin or end with Cuba. One remembers the misinformation fed the newspapers, and so the public, about former President Eisenhower's illnesses while he was in office, and one reads current evidence that military spokesmen are lying about operations in Viet Nam in attempts to generate favorable reports from the field. Whatever their purpose or their immediate results in uplifted morale, such reports can in the end serve only to discredit the military and the newspapers and frustrate and anger the public.

There may be times, in days of great national peril, when the truth must be concealed. They are rare, however, and demand the greatest discretion on the part of those who do know the facts. In such times—and in lesser ones too—silence would be better than the lie. If they can't reveal the facts, let the officials remain silent.

CIA 4 Bay of Pigs
see 4-01.2 A Thousand Days